PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Why is this relevant?
During the Covid-19 outbreak, healthcare staff will often be required to work in conditions of high pressure and potentially outside their usual areas of expertise. Making sure that staff are able to be attentive to errors, learn, share knowledge, innovate, and collaborate, requires a working climate where people are comfortable to speak up and act without fear.

Core constructs/concepts
The construct of psychological safety in teams and groups was introduced by Professor Amy Edmondson (Harvard Business School), arising from her research in healthcare and organisational settings. Psychological safety has been defined as a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking. This refers to a sense of confidence that team members will not be embarrassed, rejected, or punished when putting themselves on the line through behaviours such as asking questions, seeking feedback, noting a mistake, or offering ideas. The presence of psychological safety is particularly crucial in teams and workplaces where there are high levels of complexity, uncertainty, and interdependence.

In a systematic review of the literature, it was noted that research exploring the antecedents of psychological safety can be broadly grouped under the category of supportive environments (including leadership and relationships amongst colleagues), with psychological safety being the mechanism through which such environmental characteristics are translated into positive outcomes such as innovation, learning behaviour, and performance. Research has demonstrated that a climate of psychological safety has the potential to:

- Enable people to feel safe to speak up. This is particularly important in work groups which feature hierarchies and power differences which can shape perceptions of interpersonal risk and inhibit communication.
- Support error management and learning from failure as employees feel safe to ask for help or question management without fear of sanction.
- Lead to an increase in error reporting, enabling learning from error which in turn leads to fewer mistakes.
- Improve learning and innovation through mitigating the interpersonal risks and potential for embarrassment involved.
- Support knowledge sharing, collaboration, and the successful implementation of new practices.
- Contribute to engagement at work.
- Improve performance. In a high-profile study undertaken by Google, psychological safety was found to be the most important characteristic of high-performing teams within the organisation.

Due to the challenges posed by covid-19 (see Extreme Stressors and Decision Making briefs), individuals and teams are at risk of making mistakes. Developing a psychologically safe culture will help limit the potential adverse effects of mistakes and contribute to individuals and teams being able to learn and implement lessons in future situations, which will contribute to tackling the outbreak.

Practical recommendations
A climate of psychological safety is largely shaped by leader behaviour. Whilst the recommendations therefore particularly target those in leadership and supervisory positions, the interpersonal behaviours recommended below apply to the workforce in general:

- Practice leader inclusiveness, defined as words and deeds by a leader or leaders that indicate an invitation and appreciation for others’ contributions. Leader inclusiveness has been found to support communication by enabling the inhibiting effects of status difference to be overcome.
- Leaders should be very proactive in their efforts to encourage speaking up given people often hold ‘implicit beliefs’ about the kinds of communications that are welcome and unwelcome in the workplace. This particularly applies to upward communication, meaning communication between those of lower status to higher status.
- Leaders need to be ready to hear. Research shows that leaders can feel vulnerable when given challenging feedback, and this can mean that points of view, which are experienced as critical or negative, are dismissed or discounted.
- Leaders should show appreciation when workers voice concerns and encourage candid conversations.
- Errors should be treated (and backed up with policy) as an opportunity to learn and the reporting of errors should be actively encouraged. Again, this relies on establishing a safe culture surrounding errors and mistakes.
- Leaders and team members should adopt interpersonal skills that are conducive to reporting and learning from errors, such as avoiding blame, embarrassment, and scolding.
- Policies and structures should be developed (or appropriately adapted for the current situation) to identify errors (such as through access to appropriate data and seeking feedback) and to analyse errors (such as through discussion forums bringing together multiple perspectives).
- Activities such as performance debriefs provide an opportunity for emphasising a psychologically safe culture.

Relevant literature

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